

# American

## NEWS & VIEWS

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## Habitat for Humanity Helps Build Communities in East Asia

*Nonprofit group brings people together to provide shelter, end poverty*

By Derek Kent  
Staff Writer

Washington — In November 2009, former President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, traveled to Southeast Asia to meet with volunteers working to provide people in the Mekong region in Southeast Asia with decent, affordable housing. The nearly 3,000 volunteers from 25 countries worked together for one week to help provide housing for more than 500 families.

During the project, Habitat for Humanity's chief executive officer, Jonathan Reckford, announced plans to construct houses for 50,000 families along the Mekong River in China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Laos over the next five years.

Every year since 1984, the Carters have traveled to different parts of the world for a weeklong building project with Habitat for Humanity. This annual event is known as the Jimmy & Rosalynn Carter Work Project. U.S. presidents traditionally continue to serve the public good even after leaving office, often using their prestige to raise awareness of humanitarian issues. Former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton established the Bush-Clinton Tsunami Fund following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, raising \$1 billion, \$750,000 of which was awarded to Habitat for Humanity.

Habitat for Humanity (HFH) is a nonprofit organization founded in the United States that works to improve poverty housing around the world. In 2009, Habitat served an estimated 295,000 people worldwide and 134,000 people — 27,635 families — spread across 25 different countries in East Asia and the Pacific. More than 1.75 million people worldwide have been served by Habitat since it was founded in 1976, according to Habitat for Humanity's FY2009 report (PDF, 3.27MB).

### REBUILDING AFTER DISASTER

The Jimmy & Rosalynn Carter Work Project is Habitat for Humanity's signature event, but work does not end after each weeklong effort. Habitat continues to work throughout the year to meet its ambitious goals. Additionally, Habitat's Disaster Response Program is constantly ready to respond to any natural disaster.

In September 2009, two major earthquakes struck Indonesia: a 7.6-magnitude earthquake in West Sumatra and a 7.3-magnitude earthquake in West Java. HFH Indonesia quickly responded to both disasters, mobilizing

volunteers and families to rebuild 1,300 homes and schools. After reacting to the initial crisis, HFH Indonesia began a long-term effort to rebuild homes in Sumatra and West Java.

Habitat for Humanity's response to Indonesia's most devastating disaster, the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, has been even more extensive. More than 5,900 families in Aceh have benefited from Habitat's ongoing efforts as of December 2009. Habitat's resource center in Medan, established after the tsunami, has a stated goal of serving 4,000 families annually in programs spanning Medan, West Sumatra, the Riau Islands and Aceh.

In the wake of the 2004 tsunami, the United States mobilized search-and-rescue efforts and committed \$656 million in aid with creation of the Tsunami Recovery and Reconstruction Fund. More than 60 percent of the funding was obligated for the U.S. Agency for International Development's relief and reconstruction efforts in Indonesia. The bulk of Habitat's disaster-relief funding came from American citizens and organizations that gave more than \$1.8 billion in cash and in-kind donations to various relief efforts.

Peter Witton, Habitat for Humanity's director of communications in the Asia-Pacific region, told America.gov, "the Indonesian concept of Gotong Royong [working hand in hand] is inherent within its culture and tradition, and is applied and integrated into the reconstruction of houses and lives after a disaster."

Recovery projects are also under way in the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Samoa, India, Fiji, China, Burma and Pakistan. Globally, Habitat for Humanity has served 57,892 families through disaster response work.

### REACHING OUT TO THOSE IN NEED

Habitat for Humanity's focus remains building, rehabilitating or repairing homes to help break the cycle of poverty, although it is also looking for new ways to reach more people in need.

With support from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Habitat began hosting the biennial Asia-Pacific Housing Forum to help raise awareness of the importance of decent housing for poor and low-income families. In September 2011, Habitat for Humanity and the International Federation of Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies will hold the third forum in Bangkok, Thailand. The theme in 2011 will be sustainable shelter in an age of climate change and disasters.

Habitat also plans to expand its disaster-response capabilities, develop new financing and microfinance options for funding low-cost housing for the poor, and

expand programs in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

In 2006, Habitat launched a three-year advocacy and fundraising campaign in Indonesia called the Love Indonesia Program. Thanks to the awareness raised through the program, HFH Indonesia has assisted more than 19,600 families as of December 2009. The organization plans to increase that number substantially during the next three years.

"These are just a few new ways for Habitat for Humanity to reach more people in need," Witton said. "Our vision will remain an Asia-Pacific region where everyone has a place they can call home."

### **Uighur Deportation Prompts U.S. to Deny Cambodia Military Surplus**

By Stephen Kaufman  
Staff Writer

Washington — The Cambodian government's December 2009 decision to return 20 Uighur asylum seekers to China has prompted the United States to suspend donations of surplus defense items to Cambodia.

The State Department cited Cambodia's failure to meet its international obligation to allow a credible process to determine the Uighurs' refugee status before they were deported.

Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs P.J. Crowley said April 1 that Cambodia's December 19 decision to deport the Uighurs "contradicted earlier statements by the government that they would honor their international obligations by working with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees ... to determine whether these individuals qualified as refugees."

In a December 19 statement, the State Department had warned that the incident would "affect Cambodia's relationship with the U.S. and its international standing."

Crowley said the Obama administration informed the Cambodian government March 19 that it is suspending the delivery of approximately 200 vehicles and trailers that were to be given to Cambodia under the Excess Defense Articles program that allows for the export of surplus American military items.

The Uighurs are a Turkic-Muslim minority in western China. Chinese officials insist the Uighurs are part of a separatist movement that it accuses of carrying out terrorist actions in its Xinjiang province bordering Central Asia. The repatriations from Cambodia were reportedly done at the Chinese government's request.

According to the most recent State Department Human Rights Report, the Uighur population has been subject to persecution at the hands of Chinese authorities with the goal of diluting their identity and preventing them from exercising freedom of expression and association. The United States has repeatedly expressed its concern over the welfare and human rights of the Uighurs.

Crowley said that in December 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and other senior officials personally telephoned Cambodia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs "to express our concern and the importance ... we attach to this issue."

However, the Cambodian authorities "failed to heed not only our call that they step up to their national obligations, but in fact ... the specific obligations they have as a country" to credibly determine if the 20 asylum seekers qualified as refugees under international law.

### **Nigerian Cites Protection of Minorities as Big Plus in U.S.**

*Social justice is major American gift, Ohio University student says*

By Jim Fisher-Thompson  
Staff Writer

Washington — In addition to material attractions, educational opportunities and political openness, the United States is a beacon to the world because of its sense of social justice and protection of minorities, says Nigerian exchange student Bako Kantiok.

Since beginning graduate studies in communications at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, in September 2008, Kantiok told America.gov, he has learned that "social justice is very strong and is one of the major gifts we have here in America, the sense that your rights are protected and not just on paper. If anyone threatens you in any way, the authorities will respond and protect you."

As a member of the Bajju people — a minority group in the middle belt of Nigeria — Kantiok said he experienced prejudice and discrimination in the past. "But here in America, as a Nigerian, I feel the same as any other American who is from a European, African or Hispanic background. I am treated fairly and with respect. For me this is special. I don't need to fear being judged because of the ethnic group or religion I belong to."

Kantiok comes from near Plateau state in Nigeria — a melding ground between the predominantly Muslim north and Christian south. Cities in the region, Jos and Kaduna, periodically undergo communal violence fueled by ethnic and religious tension.

A critical factor underlying the turmoil, Kantiok said, is that "there is very little sense of social justice and trust in government — major reasons why people turn on each other and take the law into their own hands."

Before coming to America on a Ford Foundation fellowship, Kantiok attended Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria in northern Nigeria, where he received a bachelor of arts degree in drama and worked part time with Renaissance Theater Network, a nongovernmental organization that does shows for disadvantaged communities. He served for two years in the National Youth Service Corps working in Minna under the Nigerian State Council for Arts and Culture.

Kantiok said the greatest lesson he brought away from his first year at Ohio University is that "communication is essential to social change." His curriculum's focus on pragmatism impressed him the most, he said. "It's not just about theory, but you get to experiment with different broadcast technologies and this allows you a measure of creativity." His first year of studies included an internship working at the United Nations headquarters in New York City.

The Nigerian said he has expanded his knowledge and use of different media like the Internet, radio and television broadcasting, which "broadened the scope of the issues I believed can and should be addressed by people in the communications field.

"The media has a responsibility to further good governance," he said. "This is an issue, especially regarding corruption, that has bedeviled Nigeria for a long time now.

"The press owes the Nigerian public the duty to be the watchdog of society and try as much as possible to expose cases and causes of corruption, because it is the bane of the Nigerian polity and economic system," Kantiok said.

The student said he is doing his part by communicating with Nigerians about the U.S. society and how Americans deal with social problems through the Greetings From America radio program, sponsored by the U.S. State Department.

The program follows the experiences of students from Nigeria, as well as from several other countries, who study in the United States. Kantiok said he has an audio recorder and does interviews that are broadcast weekly on Freedom Radio, a Nigerian station in Kano, Jigawa and Kaduna.

The programs, which began broadcasting in Nigeria in October 2008, are also broadcast on Ray Power Radio, Abuja; Rima Radio Sokoto; Plateau State Radio and

Bauchi, according to the Web site.

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